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ABSTRACT

The Indiana Vocational Technical College (IVTC) is a state-supported two-year college with 22 campuses across Indiana. In January 1992, as part of a college-wide effort to improve institutional effectiveness, an eight-member Retention Committee (RC) was established, consisting of executive and instructional deans; directors of student services; directors of planning, research, and student relations; a registrar; and a staff person. The RC was designed to review current IVTC retention policies, collect baseline statistics on regional and institutional retention, and visit selected institutions with exemplary retention programs. After reviewing the literature on retention and tracking systems, the committee developed a two-step student cohort tracking system and solicited information on retention activities at individual IVTC campuses. In addition, RC members visited four two-year campuses in other states which had innovative retention programs. Following the site visits, a list of retention terms and activities was developed and sent to IVTC campus administrators for review and use in identifying and improving retention activities. Among the RC's findings and recommendations were the following: (1) successful retention efforts must have top-level administrative support; (2) IVTC non-persistence rates appeared comparable to the national average; (3) early warning systems at IVTC are too often informal or uncoordinated; (4) many IVTC faculty and staff orientations do not include a special emphasis on retention; (5) retention committees should be established at each IVTC campus; (6) a fund for innovative retention programs should be created; and (7) a college-wide course/class/instructor evaluation system should be implemented. (PAA)

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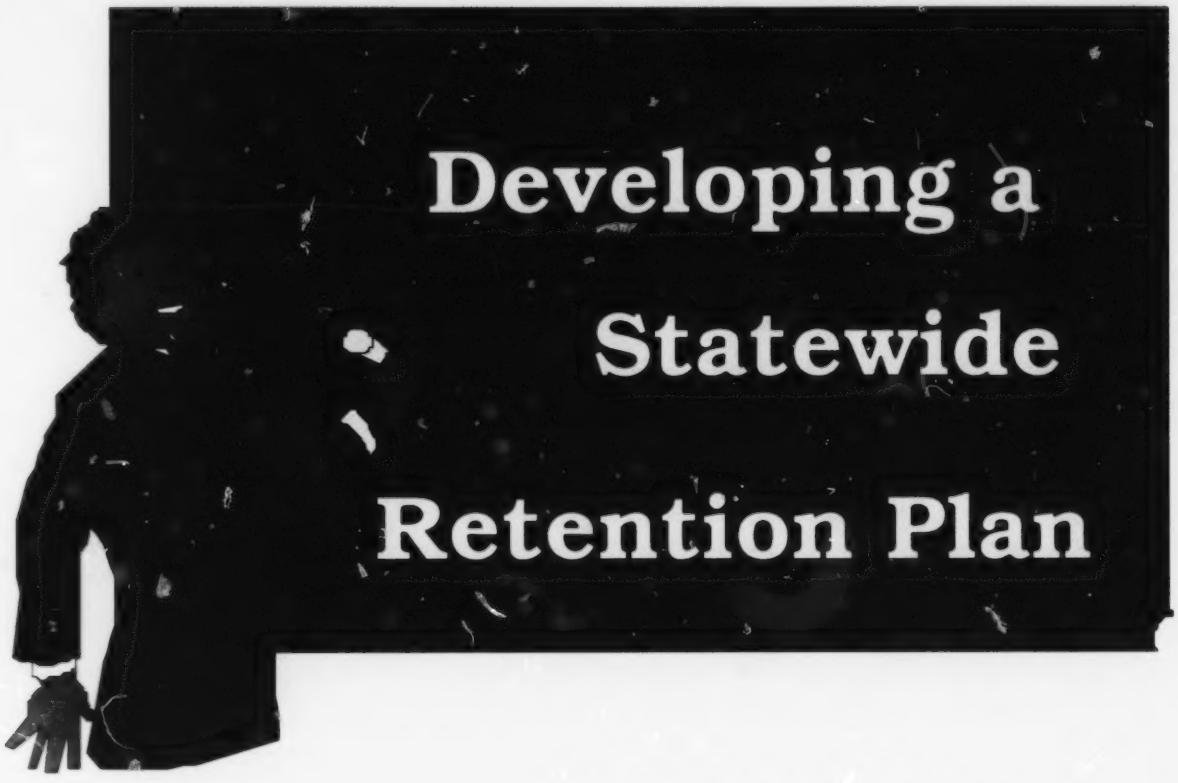

Developing a Statewide Retention Plan

Presented by:

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DEVELOPING A STATEWIDE RETENTION PLAN

ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the need to develop and implement a retention strategy plan that can be implemented across the twenty-two campuses of the Indiana Vocational Technical College system. The paper addresses the reasons why such a plan is needed, current retention practices within the system, retention practices at other two-year colleges, and data collection and analysis in order to assess the current level of retention and persistence and to measure future improvements.

INTRODUCTION

The Indiana Vocational Technical College (Ivy Tech) is a two-year, community-based state supported technical college with twenty-two campuses across Indiana. The largest campus is located in Indianapolis (approximately 10,000 annual headcount) and the smallest is in Marion (approximately 500 annual headcount). When the College was founded in 1963, it was expected that the College would not be a brick and mortar institution, but would serve the pressing training needs in a community through the use of main street store fronts, local high schools, and local businesses and industry. By 1973, the Indiana General Assembly recognized that the College needed permanent facilities and provided funds for four small construction projects.

During the first 25 years of the College's existence, many of the efforts were focused on establishing campuses, developing quality programs, and building a reputation as an educational institution that could provide training needs for both students and employers. The College experienced phenomenal growth, moving from serving 7,000 students in 1971-72 to over 57,000 students in 1991-92. In 1971, the College was authorized by the state to offer the associate in applied science degree and in 1987 was authorized to grant the associate of science degree.

In 1990, President Gerald I. Lamkin recognized the fact that the basic infrastructure of the College was in place in the 1980s. Most of the campuses had acquired facilities that enhanced the image of the College as a technical College. A basic menu of programs was available statewide and the delivery systems (computing, communications, single college concept) were in place. President Lamkin realized that the time was right to focus on services and improving quality, to move the institution toward being a recognized leader in two year education, and to provide the technical training needed by the citizens of Indiana for the 1990s and beyond.

Two new management committees were formed in order to address important issues challenging the College. Those were the Regional Academic Officers Committee (RAOC),

representing the chief academic officers throughout the system, and the Student Services Committee (SSC), representing the chief student services officers. These two committees are charged with reviewing and recommending changes needed to make Ivy Tech a model two-year college. The committees created workplans to address each issue. The academic officers have spent the last 18 months on developing a new curriculum that addresses the changing needs in the work force, as well as promoting the transfer of credit from Ivy Tech to the public four year institutions. The Student Services Committee has been studying the admissions/intake process, financial aid, and placement services. The two committees also created two joint committees: assessment and student retention. In addition, the College is reviewing how it delivers programs to business and industry and is going through the process of changing from thirteen accreditations for the North Central Association to having a single college accreditation. In total, between 500 and 1,000 faculty and staff are involved in activities to strengthen and improve the institution.

METHODOLOGY

The retention committee was created in January 1991. The eight person committee consisted of two executive deans; two deans of instruction; a director of student services; a director of planning, research, and student relations; and a registrar. The eighth member was from the central administration and served as the staff for the committee. It was co-chaired by a member from both the Regional Academic Officers Committee and a member of the Student Services Committee.

The committee reviewed the retention study work plan prepared by the RAOC and SSC and approved by the college officers. The work plan called for the following activities to occur:

Review current retention policies and procedures at the regional level.

Determine the regional and collegewide baseline statistics on retention by part-time and full-time status and by degree level.

Visit selected institutions with exemplary retention programs to gather ideas and information.

Prepare findings and develop recommendations.

Share the results of this study with the Indiana Commission for Higher Education.

ANALYSIS

The committee also reviewed some of the available literature on retention and tracking systems. Some of the items discovered during the search of the literature were:

Noel, Levitz and Saluri, in their 1986 publication Increasing Student Retention, outlined the common myths associated with retention. These myths are:

1. "...retention means lowering standards. Our experience suggests that this is absolutely incorrect."

2. "Dropouts are flunk outs When we look at confidential data supplied to us by many institutions, it is not at all uncommon to find that the mean grade point average of students who drop out is equal to or greater than the grade point average of students who persist."

3. "...students drop out because of financial problems. Research suggests that financial need and availability of financial aid have more to do with college access and choice than with persistence."

4. "...there is the feeling at many campuses that retention is the responsibility of student services; student success is someone else's concern. A fallacy that exists among many faculty is that enrollment maintenance is a function of the admissions office.

Tinto, in his book entitled **Leaving College - Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition** (1987), describes six principles of institutional action.

1. Institutions should ensure that new students enter with or have the opportunity to acquire the skills needed for academic success.

2. Institutions should reach out to make personal contact with students beyond the formal domains of academic life.

3. Institutional retention actions should be systematic in character.

4. Institutions should start as early as possible to retain students.

5. The primary commitment of institutions should be to their students.

6. Education, not retention, should be the goal of institutional retention programs.

Drew (1990) points out that examining an individuals goal commitment, evaluating the student's academic standing, and then putting in place the support services (student counselor interaction, devising early warning systems, and peer mentoring and tutoring) are all very important in insuring student success.

The Committee recognized early on that a cohort tracking system would need to be created. The College uses a single administrative computer to record student assessment scores, register students for class, award financial assistance, and provide billing information. Student

tracking data are also needed for the Indiana Commission for Higher Education and for complying with the federally mandated Student Right to Know Act. The literature review was helpful in thinking through the needs of a tracking system. Ewell, Parker, and Jones, (1988); Sanford (1989); Bers (1992); and Rodriguez (1992) commented on the need to carefully think through the elements to be included in a system, using a mainframe computer versus a personal computer to store and analyze the data, and the pitfalls in obtaining and understanding the data once it has been obtained and analyzed.

The committee reviewed these needs and developed a two step approach to create and maintain the tracking system. The cohort for any given term will be identified on the mainframe system. Data fields were added to the system that could be automatically populated by the mainframe. A previous student identification (SID) number field was added so that as students change their identification (social security number) the student would not fall out of the cohort because of an SID change. The second part of the approach was to download the data to a personal computer. Enrollment and graduate data will be added each term so that persistence, non-persistence, and graduation rates can easily be computed. This method creates consistency across the college and the information can easily be shared with local campuses to perform additional analysis.

In order to determine the level of retention activities performed at each of the campuses, a memo was sent to the campus administrative officer requesting a listing of retention activities occurring on his or her campus. From those responses, four campuses were invited to make a presentation to the committee regarding the retention activities. This approach was beneficial for several reasons. One, it provided insight to the committee to current activities within the college. Two, the committee was able to determine why some activities, even with the best of intentions, were not successful in the long run. Some findings from this portion of the study were that activities were limited by funding, a lack of personnel, successful activities were sabotaged by faculty and staff who did not see the activities as part of their job.

While reviewing the literature provided many insights on how to tackle the problem of promoting retention, it was limited in that it only provide for one-way communication. It did not include the ability to interact with one another. Bringing in speakers would improve the communication aspect but would be limited to the aspect of a single speaker outside the laboratory. To obtain a better understanding of successful retention practices it was decided that on-site visits to campuses with interesting and innovative methods would be needed. The campuses visited were: Fox Valley Technical College, in Appleton, Wisconsin; Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, Virginia; Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, Florida; and Schoolcraft Community College, Lavonia, Michigan. Two members also attended the National Student Retention Conference sponsored by the Noel•Levitz Centers. By observation and conversation, committee members were able to determine methods that work, methods that do not work (and why), and suggestions on how to improve goals and tasks.

These visits confirmed much of what current research suggests:

- Retention must be a priority of the institution and must have support from all employees, from the president to the part-time employees.
- All aspects of the operation must be of high distinction with a commitment to improve quality.
- Services to support student success and provide customer feedback must be in place.
- A good data collection system to measure and analyze change is needed and the analysis must be distributed across the institution.

These visits also proved helpful from another perspective. While the colleges visited have good plans and processes in place, personnel interviewed felt that they were just at the beginning of the journey and still were either not doing or unable to implement all of the activities recommended by experts in the field of retention. This left the committee members with the feeling that as a system, perhaps Ivy Tech was not as far behind in its commitment to improving retention as it was perceived to be. In fact the committee members were able to share some of Ivy Tech's initiatives with the schools that were visited. The process of visiting other campuses also proved to be a very powerful professional development tool. This was an unexpected result. It was professional development from the perspective of having an opportunity to see how other two year schools operate and to represent the college outside of the institution. This is something that is normally left to top administrators and thus enhanced the professional attitude of committee members.

Upon returning from the visits, the committee members realized two things: many of the Ivy Tech campuses were probably engaged in retention activities but did not associate those activities with improving student retention, and a common language to discuss retention activities would be needed. The Committee developed the terms and shared those with each of the campuses.

While developing the definitions, the committee also developed a list of activities associated with enhancing retention. The list was developed from the experience gained from the research, out-of-state visits, and previous activities identified by Ivy Tech administrators. The list, along with the definitions, was sent to the campuses for a second review. The list was intended as an easy way for administrators to identify retention activities on their campuses.

RETENTION ACTIVITIES

Retention Coordinator
Formal Retention Committee
Buddy/Mentor System
Feedback Reports

Early Warning System/Students
Early Warning System/Faculty
Student Orientation
Student Success Courses

Counseling for "At-risk" Students
Extracurricular Student Activities
Tutoring - Basic Skills/General Education
Tutoring - Technical

Child Care
Peer Counseling
Crisis Counseling
Academic Counseling

Customer Service Training - Student Workers
Customer Service Training - Faculty/Staff
Faculty In-service on Student Retention
Staff In-service on Student Retention

One-day processing for Emergency Student Loans
New Faculty Orientation/Teaching Success Seminar(s)
Formal Course Evaluation System

The results of this survey enabled the committee to have a better understanding of the baseline retention activities occurring throughout the college.

As stated earlier, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE) is also interested in how the state can be of assistance in helping the institutions improve student retention. The CHE was conducting a statewide retention study during the same time the College was conducting its study. The committee was kept abreast of commission activities and findings. The Commission concluded that the faculty play a major role in retention and that affordability, assessment, advising, and remedial instruction were all important influences of retention. One of the Commission's recommendations resulted in a request to create a state-funded "request for proposal program." That request is being considered by the 993 Indiana general Assembly. If funded, institutions would write a proposal for programs to improve or enhance student retention to receive funding.

The CHE's idea of providing grants for retention activities is not new. At the Association for Institutional Research conference in 1992, Kinnick and Ricks stated that one way Portland State University successfully encouraged faculty and staff to develop and implement innovative methods was by providing a mini-grant program. The idea of having an identified source of funds to which faculty and staff could apply was something the committee felt would encourage innovative ideas.

On the basis of all of the research and experiences of the Committee, the following findings were developed:

1. For a successful retention program to be implemented, it must have support from top administrators in terms of both personal and financial commitment.

2. Retention is not currently perceived as the responsibility of every person employed by the College, whether he/she is hourly or exempt, part-time or full-time.

3. National comparative retention statistics for two-year colleges are limited because accurate standard measures do not exist. Based upon data from ACT for the 1990 cohort, Ivy Tech's collegewide non-persistence rate (Fall, 1990 to fall 1991) for full-time associate degree-seeking students appears to be comparable to the national average (48.7 percent). However, eight of our 22 campuses had non-persistence rates above 48.7 percent, with seven of the campuses having rates of 51.9 percent or higher. For part-time associate degree-seeking students, the collegewide non-persistence rate was 62.7 percent, with 10 campuses having non-persistence rates of 65 percent or higher.

4. As a system, Ivy Tech is not unlike other two-year colleges when it comes to retention. Improving retention and understanding retention strategies and successful processes are very high priorities at the two-year level.

5. Each region has activities that promote retention, although the effectiveness of many of these activities may be questionable.

6. Customer feedback is imperative, and must be addressed by every facet of the organization in order to identify both problems and successes. Many of the institutions visited are applying the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM).

7. Customer service training is rarely provided to regular employees, student workers, or volunteers.

8. Early warning systems (assessing faculty, staff and student needs) exist on many campuses, but too often are informal or uncoordinated.

9. Many of the findings in the recently released study on retention by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education correspond to findings and recommendations of this Committee.

10. New student orientation is an important part of the retention process and should cover the entire spectrum of customer services.

11. Many faculty and staff orientations do not include a special emphasis on retention.

12. The Committee recognizes the deficiencies of the study in the areas of financial aid, efforts to improve minority retention, and improved tracking and counseling systems. Because of time and personnel limitations, the Committee did not address these topics.

On the basis of the findings, the committee developed the following recommendations:

1. CREATION OF RETENTION COMMITTEES

   A. That a retention committee be organized and recognized by the local campus administrator as a formal standing committee at each of the 22 campuses. The Committee should be chaired or co-chaired by a director-level or higher person. Faculty, student services, business office, physical plant personnel, and students should be represented on this committee.

   B. That a collegewide six-member steering committee for retention be established as a joint subcommittee of the Regional Academic Officers Committee and the Student Services Committee and include two members from the site administrators group. As one of its tasks, the steering committee should review and recommend model orientation program components for both new students and faculty/staff (both full- and part-time). In the interim, campuses should be encouraged to continue current orientation programs and share ideas with colleagues across the College.

   C. That an action plan should be drafted by each campus committee and presented to the Steering Committee. Consideration should be given to the following:

      - Develop means to identify and initiate intervention strategies for "at risk" new students. Identification could be accomplished through the use of the College Student Inventory, ASSET, or other methods deemed appropriate.

      - Develop early warning identification and intervention strategies to identify existing students appearing to have academic difficulty, poor attendance, or other behaviors which impede satisfactory progress, especially in the first two or three weeks of each term.

      - Assign a cohort of new students to every full-time faculty member who will serve as a mentor/advocate for those students on academic as well as non-academic matters.

- Develop early warning identification and intervention strategies that identify faculty or staff members who may exhibit classroom instructional difficulty or inability to effectively communicate with other staff or students, and assist those persons to correct those deficiencies.

- Expand tutoring programs to include technical areas, as well as basic skills and general education.

- Develop customer feedback strategies (such as customer service cards) that will assess the effectiveness of services to students.

- Develop student employee development programs to ensure that the quality of the students' campus work experiences is not left to chance.

2. CREATION OF A SPECIAL RETENTION FUND

   - That the Resource Allocation Committee or other such management group establish guidelines and set aside funds to be used to encourage innovative programs, research, and activities specifically aimed at improving minority retention, and other facets of retention. The results of projects funded by this program will be shared collegewide.

3. COURSE/CLASS/INSTRUCTOR EVALUATION

   - That the Regional Academic Officers review, recommend, and implement a nationally recognized course/class/instructor evaluation system to be used collegewide.

4. WORKSHOPS/SEMINAR ATTENDANCE

   - That a presentation by Noel/Levitz be made to the College Officers, Executive Deans, Deans/Directors of Instruction, Student Services Directors and members of the campus level retention committees this winter. Based upon that presentation, additional workshops on retention for faculty and staff will be considered.

5. CENTRAL OFFICE TASKS

   - That a collegewide survey to determine student intentions (new students only) be administered on a biennial basis. The purpose of this survey is to monitor change in student attitudes and to further tell the story that Ivy Tech students plan on taking longer than 150 percent of time to graduate.

   - That a collegewide retention statistical analysis be conducted each semester to monitor changes in retention/attrition and a special report be prepared.

CONCLUSIONS

To date, it appears that the College is serious about improving student retention. Even before the findings were approved by the College Officers, the Officers recommended bringing in Noel•Levitz for two identical workshops so that as many faculty and staff could participate. President Lamkin has made retention one of his topics of discussion when talking with faculty and staff across the state, and the campus and steering committees have been appointed.

The study process used by Ivy Tech appears to have been very successful in increasing the importance of student retention collegewide. It has also provided within the system the baseline measure of where the campuses currently stand concerning student persistence and retention practices. Through the study, a frame work is provided to the campuses with proven strategies for increasing the retention of students and a common structure with which to begin those strategies. At the same time, campuses will be urged to try different strategies and then to share those strategies with colleagues across the system. As Tinto points out, not every plan will work at each institution (p.137), nor should every campus plan be expected to be the same. While Ivy Tech is a single college, it reflects the communities across the state that call Ivy Tech home.

This approach to beginning a retention program can be applied to multi-campus colleges as well as large universities with many colleges. This type of study enables the institution to determine the starting point for each campus or college, provides a means of consensus to begin the program within a common structure, and provides for individual differences.

This is just the beginning for the Indiana Vocational Technical College. With the changes in curriculum, assessment of student skills, improved student services, and a renewed commitment to quality, there will be many research opportunities. Additional data provided by all of these new thrusts will allow the College and individual campuses to determine which methods appear to improve student retention and which methods should be modified or dropped completely.

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